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# Covert Action Is Overdue for a Cost-Benefit Analysis

By ALLAN E. GOODMAN

Twice in recent weeks the Reagan Administration has been embarrassed by covert actions.

In its not-so-secret war against Nicaragua, White House officials apparently encouraged private groups to provide the money, arms and advisers to the *contras*.

In 1984 Congress prohibited the Central Intelligence Agency from involvement with the *contras* or contacts with the rebel forces. But when the Nicaraguan government shot down a C-123 aircraft carrying war supplies, and the only survivor of the crash revealed that he and his late colleagues had extensive contacts with the CIA, the Administration learned that privatizing covert action does not really limit the damage if an operation it originally spawned—and subsequently encouraged on an informal basis—fails.

Last August the Administration developed a plan to provoke Libya's Col. Moammar Kadafi and encourage a coup against him by planting phony stories (disinformation) in the foreign press and misleading the American press that Kadafi was about to resort to terrorism again and that the United States was prepared to invade the country.

While it is not against U.S. law to plant false information in the foreign press, it is illegal to feed such disinformation to the American press. When details of the covert operation leaked out some weeks later, it gravely wounded the Administration's credibility, and caused the State Department's spokesman, Bernard Kalb, to resign.

For many, these incidents came as a shock. The covert actions appeared to resemble the ill-advised operations that the famous Pike and Church committee investigations in 1975 and 1976 revealed, and in the light of which Congress and Presidents Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter developed laws to rein in the CIA.

Those rules outlawed the involvement of U.S. intelligence in such things as assassination plots and drug experiments on human subjects, sharply curtailed domestic intelligence operations, required that the President personally approve each covert action undertaken abroad and that Congress be fully informed of such operations. But the rules do not ensure that covert action will be used sparingly or wisely.

When covert action fails or smacks of impropriety, it harms the image of the U.S. government at home and abroad. Allies are wary of cooperation with American intelligence services because of the inability to conduct secret operations effectively. And because the President must personally approve all covert operations, his moral authority on such issues as human rights—or deploring Soviet disinformation campaigns and other KGB operations—is considerably diminished.

Covert action is a throwback to the era following World War II when the ability to manipulate events behind the scenes—and to keep the U.S. hand hidden—was essential to prevent communist parties and leaders from taking control of many countries in Western Europe and the Middle East. In those days the media were more easily deceived and it took far longer for stories that appeared in one country to surface in another.

But communication and media gullibility have changed substantially. Virtually nothing can be kept secret from the press. Thus an operationally successful covert action has a high chance of being revealed eventually.

The result of a failed covert operation may do more damage to U.S. interests and prestige than the event the operation was designed to forestall.

At minimum, the recent disclosure of covert action should temper enthusiasm in the White House for the reliability and usefulness of it as a foreign-policy tool. But as long as the option exists, there will always be advocates for the use of covert operations and the temptation to influence others' foreign policy by such means rather than by public diplomacy.

I believe, therefore, that the time is ripe for Congress to go further than criticizing covert action on a case-by-case basis; it should conduct hearings on the usefulness of such actions in general. As the recent cases illustrate, new rules need to be developed to limit sharply the occasions when covert action can be used.

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